Negotiating the borders of social work and social justice: unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and the transition to adulthood

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This paper presents findings from a small qualitative study exploring the current context for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) when they turn 18. The UK Border Agency defines an unaccompanied child as someone under 18 who is claiming asylum in their own right and has no relative or guardian in this country to care for them. The majority of UASC will be granted Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR) until they are 17½. However, most UASC will not be granted citizenship status and only 3% of young people will be able to extend their DLR after 18, and there is little research exploring the trajectories of UASC once they become adults. This paper explores the current context for UASC as they transition to adulthood and find their ‘status’ in a state of flux on a number of interrelated fronts (age status; citizenship status; entitlement status; social status). In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from various agencies to provide a variety of perspectives. Supplementary data was collected from questionnaires with two UASC. The findings are analysed with reference to the concept of social justice and questions are raised about the borders of social justice, and the possible implications of this for social work practice.
Background
In 2011 the Home Office received 1,277 applications from Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) (Dennis, 2012). Few UASC are granted refugee status; as a matter of current UK policy the majority will be granted Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR) until they are 17½. 62% of applications in 2011 were dealt with this way, whilst a further 17% of UASC were refused outright (NSPCC, 2012). The majority of those granted temporary leave to remain will not be granted citizenship status when they become adults at the age of 18 (Wade et al., 2012; Gladwell & Elwyn, 2012). Throughout this paper I will refer to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People (UASYP). This refers to former UASC who are now over the age of 18. Where the term UASC is used it refers only to children under the age of 18.

UASC are cared for by the Local Authority (LA) under the Children Act 1989, and receive the same protections and entitlements as citizen children. UASYP who have some leave to remain or an ongoing appeal will be entitled to leaving care services under the Children Leaving Care Act (2002) in the same way as citizen children. This provides continuing financial support, access to a Personal Advisor and pathway planning up to the age of 21 (or 25 for those in full-time education). However, when a young person exhausts their rights to appeal their asylum decision (known as ‘appeal rights exhausted’, or ‘ARE’) they will lose their entitlement to care services. This paper focuses solely on young people who have not yet received full legal citizenship status, as at the point where refugee status is confirmed they are no longer considered to be asylum seekers.

Issues of immigration are increasingly visible in the world of social work. As part of a wider debate on the shifting role of social work, the relationship between social work and immigration provides a stark manifestation of inherent tensions between the care and control functions which have troubled the
profession for some time (Humphries, 2004). There is a growing need to engage openly with the dilemmas that may emerge from social work with UASYP, and what this may reflect about social work and its values such as social justice more generally.

There has been limited research on UASYP, and calls have been made its recognition as a discrete category which requires further research attention (Gladwell & Elwyn, 2012). A recent Joint Committee on Human Rights report (2013) similarly concluded that there was a lack of concern for the process of transition for UASYP, and recognised a need for reform in this area of policy and practice. Findings from current research in this area have identified the transition to adulthood as a period of increased uncertainty, vulnerability and risk for young people (Wade et al., 2005; Broad & Robbins, 2005; Gladwell & Elwyn, 2012). The transition to adulthood in this context also represents a climactic point of intersection between a number of conflicting dichotomies (child/adult; citizen/non-citizen; in need of care/in need of control) which remain a matter of debate. Whilst robust work has been done to identify the transition to adulthood as an area that requires attention, and the vulnerability of young people as they approach 18 has been documented, very little is known about what happens to young people after the age of 18, particularly in terms of those who have exhausted their appeal rights or who have absconded from services. In the context of concerns about transition, researchers have recommended robust planning which takes into account all possible outcomes, including the possibility that young people will be returned to their country of origin (Dorling, 2009; Wade 2011). However, there is a clear gap in our knowledge of what happens to UASYP after the age of 18 which creates a barrier to the multi-dimensional planning that is required.
1. Literature review

The dominant topic in UASYP research is a concern with their psychosocial needs and wellbeing. There is evidence that children who arrive in the UK unaccompanied experience higher levels of risk than those who arrive with family, and consequently they constitute a particularly vulnerable group (Hodes et al., 2008). Their experiences are characterised by trauma, loss and separation which in turn is connected with potential emotional problems (Kohli & Mather, 2003; Leavey et al., 2004; Kohli, 2007; Hodes et al., 2008). UASYP are at high risk of mental distress, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (Hodes, 2000). Uncertainty about the future is considered to have a major impact on the well-being of UASYP (Chase et al., 2008; Hodes et al., 2008; Wade, 2011). In this regard, negotiating a complex asylum system and adapting to a new ‘way of life’ have also emerged as major psychosocial challenges for UAYSP (Kohli & Mather, 2003; Groark et al., 2011).

Recent research has counterbalanced a focus on vulnerability by exploring the concept of resilience in relation to UASYP. A major study by Wade et al. (2005) found that supportive accommodation, access to education and opportunities to develop and move forward were all helpful to assist UASYP in managing the challenges of their situation in the UK. In particular, foster placements for UASYP were seen to be beneficial in terms of resilience and wellbeing (Hodes et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2005; Wade et al., 2012). Similarly, access to meaningful education was found to be of vital importance to UASYP (Kohli & Mather, 2003; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). In addition to these external protective factors, attention has turned to more personal resilience factors which may enable UASYP to cope. Rigby (2011) identified that UASYP demonstrate resilience by suppressing emotions, finding distractions and retaining autonomy. Kohli (2006a) similarly examines the role of silence for UASYP and identifies a propensity to silence as a means of enacting resistance, demonstrating agency and taking control over their lives and narratives. The
turn towards a focus on external and internal resilience factors for UASYP has begun to move away from a construction of UASYP as passive victims and has identified the ways in which they seek to express agency in difficult circumstances. Whilst this work has enhanced our understanding of UASC who are under 18, there are no studies that explore whether strategies of resilience are able to withstand the tumultuous changes at 18.

Much research with UASYP in the UK originates from within the social work discipline and there are a number of studies which are explicitly concerned with the role of social work services and practice (Rutter, 2003; Save the Children, 2003). Some research in this area, almost inevitably, identifies the failings of social work and social workers (Dennis, 2002; GLA Support Unit, 2004). Service provision is found to be patchy and inconsistent across different LAs (Stanley, 2001; Mitchell, 2003; Hai & Williams, 2004; Wade et al., 2005). The work of Beth Humphries (2002; 2004) is particularly critical of both social work with UASYP and social workers who are engaged in this field. She characterises social workers as ‘border guards’ and laments the social work profession’s lack of critical engagement with the issue of immigration, suggesting that social work has failed to challenge oppressive government policy in this area (*ibid*). An influential study by Kohli (2006b) sought to counterbalance negativity by developing a typology of the ways in which social workers seek to help UASYP. He describes the way in which they engage with UASYP across three ‘domains’ of practice: cohesion, connection and coherence. Practitioners working in the domain of cohesion are focused on assisting with the practical needs. Within the domain of connection, practitioners are attuned to emotional needs and are adept at listening and ‘witnessing’ the trauma of their clients. Coherence practitioners support UASYP with integration into their new lives, both socially and emotionally. Relatedly, Newbigging & Thomas (2011) sought to identify good practice in social work with UASYP as well as potential barriers to good practice. Their
study identified that good training, dedicated teams of experts and a positive attitude to UASYP all contributed to good practice. Barriers to good practice were identified as service-led models of practice, delays and confusion with the asylum system as well as over-procedural approaches to cases. Despite concerns about the moral and professional dilemmas which may hinder social work practice, there is research which concludes that UASYP fare relatively well within the care system, suggesting that intervention from social services, whilst far from perfect, does have a positive impact on the lives of UASYP (Dixon et al., 2006; Sinclair et al., 2007).

The transitions of UASYP at 18 have been a concern for some time and there is growing recognition of the challenges faced by UASYP as they approach adulthood (Wade et al., 2005; Kohli & Connolly, 2009). As far back as 2001 a major report warned of the potentially disastrous effects of transition and pointed to confusion around what happens at 18 (Stanley, 2001). Since then, legal changes to leaving care entitlement have been enacted. However, the transition to adulthood remains a concern and recent academic interest in this subject recognises that UASYP are at the sharp end of bureaucratic distinctions between childhood and adulthood, resulting in seismic shifts in their rights and entitlements once they reach 18. They may be transferred overnight from the relatively protected status of unaccompanied children to the adult asylum system, with all the difficulties that are connected with that transformed status, including possible dispersal, detention, destitution and removal (Stanley 2001; Dennis, 2007; NSPCC, 2012). Hodes et al. (2008) found that the risk of UASYP developing mental health problems increases as they get older, and suggests this is linked to anxiety about the transition at 18.

Wade (2011) reviews the UK evidence on this topic and identifies pathway planning as a specific concern. A 2005 study revealed that despite a duty on all LAs to prepare young people in their care for adulthood, pathway planning with
UASYP remained uneven, with some case files of UASYP containing no evidence of planning for the future (Wade et al., 2005). In response, a succession of studies have emphasised the importance of ‘multidimensional planning’ with UASYP, which requires practitioners to plan for every eventual outcome of the asylum process, including the high probability that the young person will be expected to return when they become adults (Howarth, 2005; Wade et al., 2005; Free, 2006; Dorling, 2009; Wade et al., 2012; Wright, 2012).

However, a major barrier to good pathway planning remains the gap in knowledge about what happens to UASYP after they turn 18. An increased expectation on social workers to conduct quality pathway planning has not been met by a subsequent increase in knowledge of this transition (Kohli, 2011). There are a number of reasons why this gap in knowledge may have persisted. Much of the research that has been reviewed here, whilst briefly acknowledging that many UASYP will return home at some point, is focused on their time in the UK and more specifically, their time spent in contact with services. Beyond the age of 18, contact with services, particularly statutory social services, will diminish. Therefore, social work-focused research has tended to centre on UASC, with whom they have the most contact. Issues of access for researchers will also become more difficult after 18.

Methodologically, the opus of research in this area has been criticised for a lack of work with a critical focus (Humphries, 2004; Wernesjo, 2012). Indeed, the majority of studies reviewed do not fully explore the reality of outcomes of UASYP in terms of the possibility of failing in their asylum claims, becoming ARE, facing destitution, detention and return. Whilst some studies make brief reference to the potentially temporary nature of integration and resettlement, it is not explored fully and may be obfuscated by a focus on issues of integration that permeate these studies. The impression given is that the trauma experienced by UASYP is in the past. The present and future are about
processing trauma, and attending to the immediate practical issues of settling in the UK. There is talk of ‘witnessing’ the trauma of UASYP from the past (Kohli, 2006a; Kohli, 2006b) but few have gone beyond this to ‘witness’ the trauma of the future and as such, there is a silence about the final outcomes of UASYP in the current research base.

2. Methodology
Semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with professionals working with UASYP within different types of services in order to gain multiple perspectives from the front line staff working with UASYP. The professionals interviewed were two voluntary sector workers, a UK Border Agency (UKBA) staff member, a social worker and a doctor working at a specialist service for asylum seekers. Supplementary data was also acquired from questionnaires completed by two unaccompanied young people who were destitute and without any legal status at the time of the study. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis techniques.

3. Findings
The findings that emerged from this study suggested that the experience of UASYP as they turn 18 can be understood by reference to a series of interrelated and interconnected borders which combine to create a metaphysical borderland. Borders in this sense refer to something beyond a geographical boundary and invoke invisible, yet powerful forces that differentiate the excluded from the included. The seminal work of Gloria Anzaldua (1987) on borderlands is of relevance here. For her, ‘a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants’ (Anzaldua, 1987: 7).
3.1. Into the borderland: at the borders of citizenship

Having some time ago crossed the physical borders of the UK, the challenge for UASYP as they transition to adulthood is to complete a parallel transition into legal citizenship. They must renegotiate the borders of citizenship by navigating a complex ‘immigration maze’ (Kohli & Mather, 2003), which participants felt that young people may be unprepared for.

_Sometimes they don’t get that DLR will run out at 17 or 18. They just see that they can stay and don’t realise that can change when they’re older, or they try not to think about it._ (UKBA staff member)

This need to re-engage with the asylum process coincides with a reduction in the level of support they receive from statutory services. A number of interviewees identified the aggregated impact of these two major changes as their primary concern for young people. A decrease in contact with statutory services was reportedly compensated for by an increase in contact with voluntary services, which some participants felt had a negative impact on young people:

_They don’t have anyone to fall back on so a cut in support is difficult ... they get passed between workers when they are 18 and it’s not someone they have known for a long time. They don’t care in the same way._ (Voluntary worker 1)

The borders of social work practice therefore shift on the level of the individual relationship at this time of transition. However, wider policy changes were found to be reconfiguring the borders of practice on a wider scale. Specialist teams that work with UASYP have begun to be disbanded in response to a decrease in cases. The social worker in this study confirmed that her practice
relationship with UASYP had changed markedly since the change in service organisation:

Most of the work will be done by voluntary agencies now ... when we had specialist teams we were doing all the work ourselves but we don’t have the capacity now so voluntary workers do packages of support and then that’s another person in [the young person’s] network. (Social worker)

The removal of direct work from social workers was seen by this participant as having a positive effect. However, participants working in the charity sector expressed a conflicting perspective on the retreat of statutory services which reflected concerns about shifting expectations of the voluntary sector’s role as ‘state providers’.

It’s just ignoring the fact they are here, pretending they don’t exist and using charity money to support these people. It’s irresponsible. (Voluntary worker 2)

A reduction is contact with services is not the only change to social work practice at this time. As adults, UASYP will be required to report regularly to the Home Office. As increased monitoring commences, the role of the social worker may become more ambiguous:

The Home Office sends us a list of ARE young people ... tells us if they’re not reporting, if they are reporting, if they’re warranted because they’ve not complied ... We have to keep the Home Office up to date with things like a change of address. It’s our duty to do that. (Social worker)

One voluntary worker expressed the situation bluntly, stating ‘Social services are effectively working for the government’ (Voluntary worker 4).
Disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the borders of social work in this area was evident in the interviews with the voluntary sector. This ranged from concerns that individual practitioners were not adequately trained (especially since the dissolution of specialist teams), to broader concerns that local policy was too resource-led. However, voluntary service workers were not fully aware that there is no official role for social work in many of the circumstances UASYP experience in adulthood. Furthermore, there were groups of particularly vulnerable young people of whom even the voluntary sector had little or no awareness.

We have limited contact with young people who are ARE. We don’t know much about them. I expect they work illegally and travel a lot for work. Of course the ones I do know are not necessarily the ones that are most vulnerable, the ones that have no contact with services. (Voluntary worker 1)

The findings indicate that as UASYP begin to renegotiate their citizenship, they must similarly adjust to the shifting contours of service provision by connecting with voluntary support. However, it is clear that some people do not make this transition between statutory and voluntary services and go alone, deep into the borderland without support.

3.2. **At the borders of society**

For UASYP, finding themselves on the wrong sides of the borders of citizenship and non-citizenship not only redefines their relationship to services, but also to society more generally. Past research has highlighted education as vital in promoting well-being and resilience for UASYP (Wade et al., 2005; Chase, 2013). The disruption to education was cited by the participants in this study as one of the biggest problems faced by UASYP.
Young people want to be in education; through no fault of their own they can’t. I’ve got a young person who works so hard. He’s not being removed because the government aren’t able to. He’s finished A-levels and got a place at uni but he can’t go because he can’t have the loans. He’s just in limbo now. (Social worker)

The routines and rhythms of daily life are also an important means of providing a sense of internal security for UASYP (Kohli, 2011; Chase, 2013). Being unable to cross the societal borders into the worlds of education or employment disrupts this rhythm and leaves a void in the lives of UASYP which puts them at risk.

The main risk is boredom, so, drinking too much being around groups that are going to encourage them to engage in illegal activity like drugs and petty crime. It all links back to boredom but that opens a big bag of things they can get into trouble for. (Voluntary worker 2)

The disconnection from mainstream society, coupled with a lack of access to a legitimate means of income, results in UASYP being particularly vulnerable to illegal means of survival. From the interviews the borderland emerges as a dangerous place; within, yet separate from the organising structures of society which aim to give purpose to the lives of young people. The borderland is defined in part by the absence of the social structures through which we might express our citizenship. It is also largely absent of the protections that citizens possess, not just in terms of basic financial support and shelter but also in terms of access to justice and protection from crime. Participants reported that UASYP, regardless of their status, were unlikely to report being victims of crime, fearing they would not be taken seriously or it would affect their asylum claim. Similarly, a doctor specialising in voluntary work with UASYP reported that many young people were also reluctant to access much-needed healthcare,
particularly if they were ARE, leading to a litany of serious health physical and mental health issues, some of which could have been averted if earlier treatment had been sought. Indeed the redrawing of societal borders to exclude UASYP places them outside of our borders to the extent that they may become almost invisible. ‘It’s like these people don’t exist. They do, they’re living on our streets’ (Voluntary worker 2).

Importantly, the creation of these borders was considered to have negative impacts on both UASYP and society in general. The interviews revealed strong beliefs that UASYP had a vast amount to offer society in terms of work, education and skills. Constraining UASYP in the borderland did not only prevent them receiving from society, but also from giving to society. Therefore, exclusion from the reciprocity of citizenship emerges as a key factor in their experience. Participants suggested that if young people were allowed to work or educate themselves it would not only prevent them from falling into crime and illegality, but could also make them less reliant on charity. A worker from a destitution project suggested that if her residents were allowed to work they could then pay a small sum in rent. This would secure the charity’s future, and allay constant worries about funding. Another participant suggested that bursaries should be available for young people who excelled academically. This could not only secure them a self-sustaining future if they remain, but also increase their chances of a successful return to their home country.

3.3. On the borders of adulthood

Whilst UASYP are facing the challenges of attempting to cross the borders of citizenship, both legally and socially, they are also traversing the borders that delineate childhood from adulthood. In the UK sharp bureaucratic distinctions between childhood and adulthood create a one way border, which is the location where UASYP are exiled from what Postman (1983) has called the ‘garden of childhood’.
Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the binary distinctions between children and adults which led to age-based packages of support and the arbitrary reduction in assistance based on the belief that the UASYP was now ‘an adult’. Some participants felt that UASYP represented a particularly vulnerable category based on their age and were concerned that there was a gap in services for young people. The availability of service provision was seen to be affected by the interrelationship of age, status and gender.

*There are things for children and for families. But once you’re post 16 you’re just an asylum seeker … If you’re in your 20s and a man and an asylum seeker, you’ve got no chance.* (Voluntary worker 2)

Participants also expressed concern about the impact that asylum seeking at a time of transition to adulthood had on the development of young people. They were particularly concerned that protracted periods of ‘limbo’ were detrimental. Feelings of stasis and a foreshortened sense of future have been noted by previous research into UASYP who are under 18 (Wade *et al*., 2012; Chase, 2013). The uncertainty and insecurity that UASYP experience as they approach 18 is likely to continue into adulthood as asylum claims may remain unresolved and ongoing for lengthy periods of up to five years, according to participants in this study. Aside from obstacles to development in terms of external achievements, there was a sense that something else was lost in this stage, something less quantifiable, more personal, and much harder to regain. What was lost was the experience of youth itself.

*One young person said to me, ‘I’m young, this is supposed to be the best time of my life, I’m meant to lay down the foundations of my future. How am I supposed to do all the things I’m supposed to do when I don’t know what is happening?’* (Voluntary worker 4)
The quote above captures a fear that the stalling of development at this stage in life may never be recovered; that the inability to lay the foundations of an adult life jeopardises the present and the future.

3.4. Emotional borders

There has been previous research on the mental health and emotional needs of UASYP, often with a focus on young people under 18 (Kohli, 2006a; 2006b; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). Recent developments in this area have highlighted the potential resilience of UASYP, but the professionals in this study were keen to emphasise the vulnerability of the young people in this regard and were concerned that a focus on resilience obscured the very real problems for UASYP. In reality, they felt, UASYP were often just not coping. Coping mechanisms that did emerge suggest another kind of border, the emotional borders constructed by UASYP themselves to contain and manage their emotions and anxieties. In tandem with previous findings (Kohli, 2006a) UASYP were thought to cope by avoiding thinking and talking about their situation or distracting themselves from it. Physical activities such as football, going to the gym or body-building were common distraction techniques. However, the fragility of these emotional borders was highlighted. The reprieves granted by distraction and avoidance are temporary at best.

Some will focus on things as a distraction ... so they don’t have to think about other things ... but a lot of the processing happens at night. A lot of them have nightmares. (Voluntary worker 4)

The protective emotional borders that are constructed by UASYP can only provide resilience and resistance for so long. A combination of legal difficulties, drug use, health problems and endless waiting was thought to threaten the tenuous borders of their emotional well-being, leading to what one participant described as a ‘perpetual cycle of mental health problems’. An
inability to move forward externally, in terms of education and work, as well as internally, in terms of cultivating an identity and emotional resilience can lead to a breakdown in development and mental health. The development they do achieve may be challenged again by the prospect of the journey home. Going ‘home’ to a place they no longer know may require a further readjustment of their identity, development and resilience.

3.5. Geographical borders
Many of the participants in this study were keen to highlight the increasing need to engage with the fact that many young people will likely face the ultimate border crossing and be returned to their home countries. Voluntary services were clear that their responsibilities to the young person involved following them into the borderland of the detention centre and even beyond, whilst they expressed dissatisfaction that social workers and statutory workers rarely visited young people when they were in detention prior to removal.

_You see young people in detention and removal centres but social workers aren’t visiting them. Young people in removal centres won’t have seen their social workers since they’ve been detained... The last young person I had was really angry about that, like, well, they don’t really care about me._ (Voluntary worker 4)

Some of the participants from voluntary services maintained regular contact with young people after they returned and were beginning to learn about the kinds of preparation that could help young people at the point. Promoting and assisting contact with family members and friends in their home countries was considered to be the best way of helping them achieve some level of safety on return. Whilst social workers may already use the Red Cross tracing and messaging services to this end, participants felt there was lack of trust in this service and concerns that it may put family members at risk. Voluntary services
had more success using social media such as Facebook to track down family members. Tracing and maintaining family relationships was rarely this simple and there were barriers to overcome. Participants identified that there was a certain amount of shame attached to being returned, and families might reject returnees, believing them to be criminals. Other families may reject returnees as they are still indebted to the agents who arranged their crossing in the first place, and are disappointed that the young person has failed to achieve citizenship in the UK. However, the consequences of returning to a home country unsupported can be disastrous for the young person:

One young person returned and had absolutely nobody, he went off into unsafe areas, was on the streets of Kabul and was attacked and raped. (Voluntary worker 4)

This final border of return emerged from the study as the most urgent issue for many services. Full engagement with the issue was relatively new in the sector and the development of support for return was in its infancy. Knowledge of how to best prepare young people for return was limited and speculative. However, the desire for such services was increasing. The voluntary sector were mindful of the role they could play, social services were under pressure to plan for the return of UASYP, and UASYP themselves were reported to be becoming more resigned to the probability of returning home.

4. Discussion
The findings from this study have presented the experience of UASYP in terms of the experience of inhabiting an uncertain territory located between two worlds: they are both within and without society, they are in the hinterland between childhood and adulthood, they are simultaneously running away from ‘home’ and moving closer to a return to it. Legal constructs form the foundation of the socio-political borders that begin to detach UASYP from services and
society, creating a space that lies between citizenship and return, which I have referred to as the borderland. The borderland is a consequence of an ‘othering’ process, which impacts on UASYP in practical and psychological ways. Services, including social work services are implicated in this process.

The experiences of UASYP are heterogeneous and highly dependent on the various alterations in their legal status. The question of legal status is not easily resolved and the journey to either citizenship or return can be convoluted and lengthy. Along the way, the borders of the society they have known will shift, contort and transform until they may find themselves unable or unwilling to access the social spaces that are available to citizens. Kohli (2011) represents the journey of UASC as one that moves from the ‘edge to the centre’. Whilst this may be the case for under-18s, the opposite appeared to be true from the findings here. For UASYP journeying into adulthood, the direction of travel is from a more central societal position to one on the very outer edges of society, characterised here as a place beyond society, the borderland.

The borderlands discovered here were both social (in terms of citizenship and belonging in society) and emotional. After 18, UASYP found themselves being physically, metaphorically and emotionally relocated into the borderlands. Socially, this was experienced as a series of disconnections from the structure of society. Rawls (1971) suggests that the structures of society are integral to the mediation of social justice. The dislocation of UASYP from these structures therefore represents a parallel disconnection from social justice.

The relocation and containment of UASYP in the social borderlands is the result of a confluence of changes to their legal status in terms of citizenship and age. It is the interaction of these two elements which makes the UASYP experience so unique and complex. It also the interaction of these elements which mark out UASYP as particularly vulnerable. A disconnection from
society has emerged as evidently dangerous, but so too is the attached severance from social justice.

A most disturbing feature of the borderland for UASYP was its ability to render UASYP invisible. The further UASYP ventured in, the harder it was to see them. This is true not just on a wider societal level, but also in terms of the knowledge that services and researchers have in this area. This is especially true when we consider the paucity of knowledge of UASYP in certain situations, the ones deep in the borderland, where we have not yet managed to follow, in practice and in research. But it also true on variety of other levels. As Miklavic (2011: 500) suggests, ‘invisibility is an unofficial status ascribed to the illegal immigrant by the host country via exclusionary practices resembling social death’. This social death was a theme referred to by participants in this study also.¹ UASYP remain unseen, unheard or are represented as part of an immigration ‘problem’ to be solved. In combination, the interlocking borders discussed in this paper render UASYP detached, dislocated and eventually disappeared, whether literally or metaphorically. As Honneth (2003) has suggested, recognition is a vital human need and integral to the operation of social justice. The invisibility that UASYP experience, in terms of social structures such as education, services and society, diminishes their access to social justice.

In terms of social work in particular, Wright (2012) suggests that it might not be appropriate for social workers to promote or discuss the issue of return (particularly voluntary return) as it could give the impression that they are working for the government and impede the relationship of trust between social worker and UASYP. She similarly points to the restrictions that social workers have as they are not independent from the state. Relatedly, voluntary services

¹ However, Miklavic (2011) also draws our attention to another aspect of invisibility for the migrant, the protective function that invisibility can provide for those who wish to go underground. Whether the UASYP becomes the agent of his own invisibility or not, the implications for Social Justice remain the same.
were historically wary of engaging on the issue of return because they were politically opposed to it. Services in this area can be seen to be drawing their own practice borders. This may be done as a means of achieving personal protection from morally and politically difficult situations. It is also a means of protecting oneself professionally by defining the limits of intervention and support in accordance with the protection of professional and political positions. This demonstrates how the borders that I have discussed do not simply exist, and are not just constructed solely by government policy. They are co-created by a variety of social actors. As Gill suggests, policy and law ‘are not so much an imposition on society as a crystallisation of pre-existing exclusionary practices’ (2010: 632). This insight leads us to reimagine the relationship social work has to social justice. The traditional social work conceptualisation of social justice as a way of opposing oppressive social structures is subverted and pertinent questions about the meaning of social justice on an individual level. Whilst policy may be interrogated for social injustice, and social workers are committed to challenging these injustices, it is through individual practice that justice and injustice is manifested. Holscher & Bazalek (2012), writing about social work with refuge communities, suggest that a critical social justice perspective requires social workers to reflect on their own role within social structures. Similarly, voluntary services must engage in a similar process of reflection.

The findings from this study suggested that social work with UASYP was a challenging area of practice in which personal practice was particularly restricted by local policy and resources. Indeed, a parliamentary committee report of the human rights of UASYP (Joint Parliamentary Committee, 2013) concluded that services for UASYP in transition were too resource-led. However it was also an area in which those on the outside (for instance voluntary services) were dismayed at the inability of social workers to provide support to patently needy and vulnerable young people, purely on the basis of
their asylum status. The current role for social work seemed at odds with the social work commitment to social justice.

This was particularly evident in terms of return, a point at which social work had little contribution to make. Devici (2012), inspired by the previous work of Kohli (2006b) has written poignantly about her practice with UASYP and speaks particularly of the need to bear ‘bear witness’ for UASYP. However, the findings from this study suggest that the capacity to bear witness for UASYP does not extend into their most difficult transitions, to adulthood and to home. As UASYP are estranged from social justice, so too is social work in this area. The tension between immigration and children’s legislation in this area has been documented (Humphries, 2004; Wright, 2012). However, there has been little discussion of the tension between the social work role with UASYP as it currently stands and the social work commitment to social justice.

For work with UASYP this means questioning the borders of our practice; borders that are created through policy and guidance, borders that are created by ourselves in our practice, and borders that are created by UASYP themselves. These borders are politically, culturally and individually constructed and we must ask where the borders of practice are located, who maintains them, and whom do they ultimately serve?
References


